The role of Kunjali Marakkars in the anti-colonial struggle in Kerala

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Introduction

"The freedom of sea is the absolute freedom of a nation"[1]

India maintained her positions one of the foremost among the maritime nations. Spices, precious stones, animals and hill products of Kerala attracted traders from all over the world. They maintained friendly relations with other countries and in consequence trade and commerce flourished .In the beginning of the 16th century ,the advent of Portuguese changed the peace that had existed hitherto in Kerala over centuries suddenly disappeared. Here I would try to find out how to resist Malabar people against the anti-colonial power under the leadership of Kunjali Marakkars., the navy chief of Zamorin.

Advent of Portuguese

The connection of Portuguese with Malabar in the 16th century .It is a turning point in the history of Malabar .It signalled an important development in the history of Kerala Muslim fortune. The coming of the Portuguese was aimed at "Christians and Spices". Gama started his journey from the port Belom at Lisbon with the three ships. From Lisbon to Calicut, they covered 207 days (8/7/1497 to 20/05/1498) and 4000 leagues and Vasco da Gama arrived on the Malabar Coast, the land of golden dreams.

The Portuguese found the entire spice trade in the hands of native and Arab Muslims. Their blocked of cargos to Gamas ship convinced him of the need to break the Moorish monopoly. He initiated the policy of armed trade and his successors continued the policy of

[1] KKN Kurup, legacy of Islam (Kerala) Samayam publication, Calicut P 61

commerce conquest and conversion. It soon became evident that the Portuguese economic and religious motivations were combined with deep animosity against the Muslims, Which had come into being as a result of the many years of clashes on the Iberian Peninsula.

A brief sketch of Kunjalis:

There is a lot of obscurity about the origin of the illustrious Kunjali Marakkars. Tradition says that they were the descendants of Arab Muslim merchants. Who came for trade with Malabar in the 7th AD .There is also a view that they hailed from Panthalayani Kollam under pressure from the Portuguese, they left the place for Tikkodi and from they moved to Kottakal at the mouth of Kottapuzha River.

Another view of Marakkar, they were originally marine merchants or Cochin. Who were forced to leave Cochin to Ponani in the Zamorins territory, when the Portuguese established themselves at Cochin and got favours from the local raja[2]. Later they moved their headquarters to Putupattanam, on the south bank of Alappuzha.

Zainuddin makhdum, the author of Tuhfat al Mujahideen stated that the early history of marakkars " In the Same year (1524) some of the faqihs of koshi (cochin), like Ahmad Marakkar ,his brother , kunjali Marakkar , their uncle Muhammed ali Marakkar and other dependents felt their desire to wage war against the Portuguese.They left koshi for Kalikut"[3] after moving to the Zamorins domination they visited the Zamorin and offered their swords, ships and services to him in this fight against the Portuguese .the Zamorin , who had already developed hatred against the Portuguese ,readily accepted their offer and took them in to his service.

[2] O K Nambiar,portuguese pirates and Indian seamen , Bombay ,p 98
[3] Zainuddin Makhdoom, Tuhfat al Mujahideeen trans SMH Nainar Madrass, p 66

The word Marakkar is an abbreviation of "Margakkaran" (follower of the law) and the title is appealed to a person of foreign religion like Christian and Muhammadans [4]. Another view, the word Marakkar would mean boatman and it originated from the Arabic root Markab or the tamil root Markkala-rayan (chief of the wooden ship). S C Hills view it originated from Marati word Marakar(demon)used by the people of Konkan coast colloquially for seamen. Another view the term marakkar originated from Catamaran or maram, which mean a raft or boat. The owner of a maram is called Marakkar.

The term marakkar is an honorofic plural of the word Marakkar a common surname applied to the Hindu sea-going folk (Mukkuvas) of the Malabar coast.[5] In several parts of Kerala, mukkuvans is still called Marakkar. Obviously, the Muslim who came by sea, and whose profession was maritime commerce came to be designated as Marakkar. This probably the origin of term, but it seems to have remained a title only. There are a large number of instances even up to the 18th century when the rulers have conferred the title on a distinguished Mappila.

The word Kunjali is an honorific title, which means "dear ali" when, added to Marakkar it means dear ali, the navigator of ship.[6] Kunjali Marakkar 1 was the first navy chief of Zamorins army on an efficient footing fight the Portuguese on equal term.

Role of kunjalis agaist the portuguese

Kunjalis were the hereditary admirals of Zamorin, had a conspicuous role in the epic fight against the Portuguese attempt to dominate Malabar trade. They were valiant fighters who sacrificed their sweat and blood for their country. K M Panikkar says "during the

[4] Hussain Khan Qadir quoted Ibrahim Kunju , Mappila Muslims of Kerala, Trivandrum, p 62
[5] Thurston, e Castes and Tribes of southern India, Madras, vol-V P112
[6] Kunjali V , origin of the kunjali and organisation of their fight in Indias naval traditions, Delhi p 3

hundred years of war with the Portuguese this family produced a succession of four remarkable sea captains whose prowess make the name of Malabar pirates resound still in history. In initiative, courage navigational skills and persistence they bear comparison with the great figures of naval warfare".[7]

Kunjali 1 (1507-1531)

Muhammed Kunjali was an experienced and brilliant strategist in the art of hit and run tactics and in fact he was the real originator of guerrilla warfare at sea. He watched with alarm the rapacity of Portuguese, their contempt of Islam, their violation of agreements and their acts of aggression on sea and land. They built a large number of fast-moving paraos = padvas (small ships) which could manoeuvre easily in shallow water, where pursuit by the bigger Portuguese ships was impossible. Manned by 30-40 rowers these paraos were culttarget for the enemies cannon. After the death of kunjali, kutty became the leader of zamorin.

Kunjali II (1531-1571)

Kunjali II was the son of Kutti Ali, for the next forty years he remained the admirals of Zamorin of Calicut. He had learnt the naval warfare in the new school and had no hesitation to pay back the Portuguese in their own coin. For a number of years, kunjali eluded the vigilance of the Portuguese and preyed upon Portuguese shipping trade. The Luis de Mallo was able to force an action off Cannanore . In a hard fought action, the flagship of Kunjali was sunk and three more captured, but the rest retired unmolsted since the Portuguese were unable to pursue to them. A major attack of the Portuguese during this time (1564) was against the wealthy merchant Aboobacker ali of Cannanore and in the bombardment that

[7] KM Panikkar , india and the Indian ocean ,London,p45

followed the city was plundered and Ali was killed. Kunjalis vigilance made it impossible for the assistance from Goa and saved the littoral for about forty years.

Kunjali III (1571-1595)

Pattu marakkar was popularly known as Kunjali III. For the great services rendered by pattu Marakkar in the reduction of the Portuguese fortress at Chaliyam, the Zamorin granted him permission to erect a fort and dockyards art puthupattanam (puthuppanam) at the mouth of the Akalappuzha, then the headquarters of the Marakkar. Within two years a strong fort rose up at Puthupattanam(Puthuppanam) ,It was after building a fort here that the place acquired the name of Kottakal and the river of got the name Kottapuzha. The newly erected fort came to be known as Marakkar kotta. Pyrad de Lavel referred it as "Macaire Coste". The title of Kunjali was conferred up on Pattu Marakkar and he became famous in history as Kunjali III and a terror to the Portuguese captain .zamorin also conferred on him many privileges and powers equal to the best Nair chieftain of the Calicut force.

Kujali IV (1595-1600)

Muhammed Kunjali Marakkar popularly known as Kunjali Marakkar IV. Who become the chief of Kttakkal. Soon he became a great threat and danger to the Portuguese navigators. Kunjalihad earned great fame and prestige, as he became known from the Cape of Good Hope to China. Knowing that the Portuguese would try their best to ruin him, he fortified the Kottakkal fort by land and sea and made it more impregnable by installing the latest Cannons. "The site of fort as a strong wall which secured the town, with two towers, one at each end , and along the seashore stuck palisadoes, where are also two bastions, one greater than the other, planted with gross cannon to secure the entrance of the harbour ,which

besides was made very difficult even to small vessels by masts strongly chained together."[8] Being thus secure, he carried on his uncles decision of fighting the Portuguese with far greater success. He captured many Portuguese vessels and assisted the enemies of the Portuguese including the queen of Ullal, when she revolted. These successes seem to have brought about misunderstanding between the Zamorinand his lieutenant. The Zamorin believed that Kunjali had become an overmighty subject, and Kunjali felt that the Zamorin was not much interested in the welfare of his seamen as before. Envy and misunderstanding worked their silent way to estrange the vassal from his sovereign. The Portuguese utilised the opportunity to widen the gulf by insinuating that Kunjali was out to declare his independence, and consequently was equally prejudicial to the Zamorin and the Portuguese. Therefore they suggested that it was necessary to join together to extirpate his power. To add to these troubles several rumours of like Kunjali having adopted high –sounding titles, like King of Malabar Moors, Lord of the Indian sea only provoked the Zamorin.

The Zamorin was now sufficiently incensed against Kunjali that he was willing to enter into a treaty with the Portuguese. It was agreed between them that the Zamorin by land and Portuguese by sea should jointly undertake the expulsion of Kunjali and raze of his fort. The combined forces of the Zamorin and the Portuguese blockaded Kottakkal by land and sea . Kunjali surrender befor the Zamorin and hand over the Portuguese. Thus ended the power of Kunjali Marakkar. The fall of Kottakkal and the death of Kunjali did not however avail the Portuguese any respite from fighting which they hoped for. Yet did the Portuguese afterwards pay dearly for his head; for the Malabar ,in revenge ,put to death all Portuguese they could lay hands on; and the king of Calicut had great regret of having delivered so

[8] Faria Y Souza Portuguese Asia Vol I, London P 76

tvaliant a man for Cognially and his brother were esteemed the bravest Captains in all the East Indies.[9]

Conclusion

The Kunjali Marakkars of Kottakkal were the Mappila admirals of the Zamorins in their classic fight against the Portuguese attempt to dominate the commerce and politics of Malabar. They sacrifice their lives and resources in defence of their country and sovereign.

Kunjali, still was fully aware of the dangers of the Portuguese intervention in the trade and politics of the region which virtually weakened and ruined the early centres of trade in the East like Calicut, Cochin and Quilon in Kerala and Malacca in the East and Ormuz in the West. The economic power of both Zamorin and the Mappilas was highly deteriorated. No doubt that the lives of these chiefs remained us of heroic memories of these veteran fighters; reflect story and honour of all Malabar and their innumerable victories and marvellous achievements against the atrocities of the Portuguese ,all indeed from a brilliant chapter in the history of Malabar.in fact the Kunjalis represent a great naval tradition of India. K M Panikkar observed "it was their leadership which resisted the Portuguese attempt of establishing a colonial state in Malabar much to the contrast of what happened in Goa."[10]

[9] Pyrad de Lavel reference to the marcaire coste(voyage to the East Indies vol I p356
[10] .KKN Kurup, *"The Kerala society and the Portuguese in India's naval traditions,P.52 "*